

Sjögren's and acupuncture

By Henry McGrath, Acupuncture Course Director for the Acupuncture Programme of the College of Naturopathic Medicine

Acupuncture has been used in China since at least 400BC. It is used to treat a huge variety of medical problems, and is offered in Chinese hospitals alongside 'orthodox' medicine.

According to acupuncture theory, there is a network of channels running through the body, conducting 'qi', which can loosely be translated as 'life force'. Modern research using PET scanners has shown that the qi system is actually a network of sub-atomic particles (hydrogen protons to be precise). Using a brain scanner, we can observe that when needles are inserted in key acupuncture points, certain areas of the brain become active. For example, when a needle is inserted in a point in the little toe which is used to treat eye problems, the visual cortex (the part of the brain associated with sight) becomes active. When a needle is inserted into a point on the hand used to treat pain, certain pain control centres in the brain become active.

Using the latest research methods, a team in the United States Navy has been investigating how acupuncture can be used to treat the problem of dry mouth, or 'xerostomia'. The team found that needling a combination of three acupuncture points on each ear, plus one on each hand, led 80% of patients with dry mouths to report a marked increase in salivation. In many of the patients, the lack of salivation had been caused by radiation damage to the salivary gland, following radiotherapy for head and neck cancer. In some of the patients the dry mouth had been caused by Sjögren's Syndrome.

Some people argued that the treatment was 'all in the mind', and that there was no actual increase in salivation. A Scandinavian group of researchers decided to test whether the treatment was in fact increasing the production of saliva. They put cotton wool balls in the patients' mouths, and weighed them before and after the acupuncture. They found that the cotton wool balls weighed more after the treatment, compared to a control group where no treatment was given, thus showing that acupuncture had increased salivation, making the cotton wool balls heavier.

So how does acupuncture increase salivation? Acupuncture is thought to help the brain move from 'fight or flight' state (sympathetic dominance) to 'relaxed' state (parasympathetic dominance). When one is in 'relaxed' mode the production of saliva tends to increase.

Following on from the American research, three hospitals in the South West of England decided to try the acupuncture treatment on cancer patients who had lost salivary function due to radiotherapy. Last year I visited the hospitals to see the treatments performed, and discussed the results with the staff and patients. The treatments are given with about six patients sitting in a circle. The needles are inserted, and left in for about 20 minutes, during which time the patients can chat with each other. The results obtained were similar to those in the US, with at least four out of five patients reporting increased salivation. Many patients said that the treatments allowed them to eat more kinds of food, and others said that they no longer needed to sip water constantly.



Since my visit I have used the protocol with many patients in my own clinic, and most have reported great improvements in salivation. Those with Sjögren's have also reported that their dry, painful eyes have greatly improved, and that they need less eye drops.

In summary, there is mounting evidence that acupuncture is an effective treatment for both dry mouth and dry eyes. I have patients who are willing to discuss the improvements they have experienced. I would therefore highly recommend acupuncture to those with Sjögren's disease.

About the author

Henry McGrath has been studying and practicing oriental medicine since 2003. He is the Acupuncture Course Director for the Acupuncture Programme of the College of Naturopathic Medicine, which runs acupuncture training in London and Bristol. He has written numerous articles and books, his latest publication being 'Traditional Chinese Medicine Approaches to Cancer' (Jessica Kingsley Publishers). He lives in Bristol, and runs his own acupuncture and herbal medicine clinic there.